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KARMA

A Story of Early Buddhism

by Paul Carus

SECOND
EDITION



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and printed

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KARMA:

A STORY OF EARLY BUDDHISM,

BY

Paul Carus.

DĒVALA'S RICE-CART.

Long, long ago in the days of early Buddhism, India was already in a most prosperous condition. The Aryan inhabitants of the country were highly civilized, and the great cities were centres of industry, commerce, and learning.

It was in those olden times that Pandu, a wealthy jeweller of the Brahman caste, travelled in a carriage to Bârânasi, which is now called Benares. He was bent on some lucrative business, and a slave who attended to the horses accompanied him.

The jeweller was apparently in a hurry to reach the place of his destination, and as the day was exceedingly pleasant, since a heavy thunder storm had cooled the atmosphere, the horses sped along rapidly.

While proceeding on their journey the travellers overtook a samana, as the Buddhist monks were called, and the jeweller observing the venerable appearance of the holy man, thought to himself: "This samana looks noble and saintly. Companionship with good men brings luck; should he also be going to Bârânasi, I will invite him to ride with me in my carriage." Having saluted the samana the jeweller explained whither he was driving and at what inn he intended to stay in Bârânasi. Learning that the samana, whose name was Nârada, also was travelling to Bârânasi, he asked him to accept a seat in his carriage. "I am obliged to you for your kindness," said the samana to the Brahman, "for I am quite worn out by the long journey. As I have no possessions in this world, I cannot repay you in money; but

The samana saluted Dêvala, the farmer, and began to help him repair his cart and load up the rice, part of which had been thrown out. The work proceeded quickly and Dêvala thought: "This samana must be a holy man; invisible devas* seem to assist him. I will ask him how I deserved ill treatment at the hands of the proud Brahman." And he said: "Venerable sir, can you tell me why I suffer an injustice from a man to whom I have never done any harm?"

And the samana said: "My dear friend, you do not suffer an injustice, but only receive in your present state of existence the same treatment which you visited upon the jeweller in a former life. You reap what you have sown, and your fate is the product of your deeds. Your very existence, such as it is now, is but the Karma of your past lives."

"What is my Karma?"
asked the farmer.

*Devas are spiritual beings,
gods, or angels.



"A man's Karma," replied the samana, "consists of all the deeds both good and evil that he has done in his present and in any prior existence. Your life is a system of many activities which have originated in the natural way of evolution, and have been transferred from generation to generation. The entire being of every one of us is an accumulation of inherited functions which are modified by new experiences and deeds. Thus we are what we have done. Our 'Karma' constitutes our nature. We are our own creators."

"That may be as you say," rejoined Dévala, "but what have I to do with that overbearing Brahman?"

The samana replied: "You are in character quite similar to the Brahman, and the Karma that has shaped your destiny differs but little from his. If I am not mistaken in reading the thoughts of your mind, I should say that you would, even to-day, have done the same unto the jeweller if he had been in your place, and if you had such a strong slave at your command as he has, able to deal with you at his pleasure."

The farmer confessed, that if he had had the power, he would have felt little compunction in treating another man, who had happened to impede his way, as he had been treated by the Brahman, but thinking of the retribution attendant upon unkind deeds, he resolved to be more considerate in the future with his fellow-beings.

The rice was loaded and both together pursued their journey to Bâranasi, when all of a sudden the horse jumped aside. "A snake, a snake!" shouted the farmer; but the samana looked closely at the object at which the horse shuddered, jumped out of the cart and saw that it was a purse full of gold, and the idea struck him: "No one else but the wealthy jeweller can have lost this purse." He took the purse and handing it to the farmer said; "Take this purse and when you come to Bâranasi drive up to the inn which I shall point out to you; ask for Pandu, the Brahman, and deliver the purse. He will excuse himself for the rudeness with which he treated you, but tell him that you have forgiven him and wish him success in all his undertakings. For, let me tell you, the more successful he is, the better you will prosper; your

fate depends in many respects upon his fate. Should the jeweller demand any explanation, send him to the vihâra* where he will find me ready to assist him with advice in case he may feel the need of it."

BUSINESS IN BENARES.

To corner the market of the necessities of life is not a modern invention. The old testament contains the story of Joseph, the poor Hebrew youth who became minister of state, and succeeded with unscrupulous but clever business tricks in cornering the wheat market, so as to force the starved people to sell all their property, their privileges, and even their lives, to Pharaoh. And we read in the Jataka Tales † that one of the royal treasurers of Kasi, which is the old name of Bârânasi, made his first great success in life by cornering the grass market of the metropolis on the day of the arrival of a horse dealer with five hundred horses.

When Pandu the jeweller arrived at Bârânasi it so happened that a bold speculator had brought about a corner in rice, and Mallika a rich banker, and a business friend of Pandu's, was in great distress. On meeting the jeweller he said: "I am a ruined man and can do no business with you unless I can buy a cart of the best rice for the king's table. I have a rival banker in Bârânasi, who learning that I had made a contract with the royal treasurer to deliver the rice tomorrow morning, and being desirous to bring about my destruction, has bought up all the rice in Bârânasi. The royal treasurer must have received a bribe, for he will not release me from my contract and tomorrow I shall be a ruined man unless Krishna will send an angel from heaven to help me."

While Mallika was still lamenting the poverty to which his rival would reduce him, Pandu missed his purse. Searching his carriage

* Buddhist monastery.

† *Buddhist Birth Stories*. Translated by T. W. Rhys Davids, P. 169.

without being able to find it, he suspected his slave Mahaduta; and calling the police, accused him of theft, and had him bound and cruelly tortured to extort a confession. The slave in his agonies cried: "I am innocent, let me go, for I cannot stand this pain; I am quite innocent at least of this crime, and suffer now for other sins. O, that I could beg the farmer's pardon whom, for the sake of my master, I wronged without any cause! This torture, I believe, is a punishment for my rudeness."



While the police officer was still applying the lash to the back of the slave, the farmer arrived at the inn, and, to the great astonishment of all concerned, delivered the purse. The slave was at once released from the hands of his torturer. But being dissatisfied with his master, he secretly left and joined a band of robbers in the mountains, who made him their chief on account of his great strength and courage.

When Mallika heard that the farmer had the best rice to sell, fit for delivery to the royal table, he bought at once the whole cart-load for treble the price that the farmer had ever received, and Pandu, glad at heart to have his money restored, hastened at once to the vihâra to receive further explanations from Nârada, the samana.

Nârada said: "I might give thee an explanation, but knowing that thou art unable to understand a spiritual truth, I prefer to remain silent. However, I shall give thee some advice: Treat every man whom thou meetest as thine own self; serve him as thou wouldst demand to be served thyself; for thus thou shalt sow a sowing of good deeds, the rich harvest of which thou shalt not fail to reap."

"Give me, O samana, the explanation," said the jeweller, "and I shall thereby be better able to follow your advice."

The samana said: "Listen then, I will give you the key to the mystery. If you do not understand it, have faith in what I say. Self is an illusion, and he whose mind is bent upon following self, follows an *ignis fatuus* which leads him into the quagmire of sin. The illusion of self is the veil of Mâyâ that blinds your eyes and prevents you from recognising the close relations that obtain between yourself and your fellows, which are even closer than the relations that obtain among the various organs of your body. You must learn to trace the identity of your self in the souls of other beings. Ignorance is the source of sin. There are few who know the truth. Let this motto be your talisman:

'He who hurts others injures himself.

'He who helps others advances his own interests.

'Let the delusion of self disappear from your mind.

'And you will naturally walk in the path of truth.'

‘To him whose vision is dimmed by the veil of Māya, the spiritual world appears to be cut up into innumerable selves. Thus he will be puzzled in many ways concerning the transmigration of soul-life, and will be incapable of understanding the import of an all-comprehensive kindness toward all living beings.’”

The jeweller replied: “Your words, O venerable sir, have a deep significance and I shall bear them in mind. I extended a small kindness which caused me no expense whatever, to a poor samana on my way to Bārānasi, and lo! how propitious has been the result! I am deeply in your debt, for without you I should not only have lost my purse, but would have been prevented from doing business in Bārānasi which has greatly increased my wealth, while if it had been left undone it might have reduced me to a state of wretched poverty. In addition, your thoughtfulness and the arrival of the farmer’s rice-cart preserved the prosperity of my friend Mallika, the banker. If all men saw the truth of your maxims, how much better the world would be, how greatly evils would be lessened, and public welfare enhanced! As I am anxious to let the truth of Buddha be understood, I shall found a vihāra at my native place, Kaushambi and invite you to visit me, so that I may dedicate the place to the brotherhood of Buddha’s disciples.”

AMONG THE ROBBERS.

Years passed on and Pandu’s vihāra at Kaushambi became a place in which wise samanas used to stay and it was renowned as a centre of enlightenment for the people of the town.

At that time the king of a neighboring country had heard of the beauty of Pandu’s jewelry, and he sent his treasurer to order a royal diadem to be wrought in pure gold and set with the most precious stones of India. When Pandu had finished the work, he started for the residence of the king, and as he expected to transact other profitable business, took with him a great store of gold pieces.



The caravan carrying his goods was protected by a strong escort of armed men, but when they reached the mountains they were attacked by a band of robbers led by Mahāduta, who beat them and took away all the jewelry and the gold, and Pandu escaped with great difficulty. This misfortune was a blow to Pandu's prosperity, and as he suffered some other severe losses, his wealth was much reduced.

Pandu was much distressed, but he bore his misfortunes without complaint, thinking to himself: "I have deserved these losses for the sins committed in my past existence. In my younger years I was very hard on other people; when I now reap the harvest of my evil deeds I have no cause for complaint."



As he had grown in kindness toward all beings, his misfortunes only served to purify his heart; and his chief regret, when thinking of his reduced means, was that he had become unable to do good and to help his friends in the vihâra to spread the truths of religion.

Again years passed on and it happened that Panthaka, a young samana and a disciple of Nārada, was travelling through the mountains of Kaushambi, and he fell among the robbers in the mountains. As he had nothing in his possession, the robber-chief beat him severely and let him go. On the next morning Panthaka, while pursuing his way through the woods, heard a noise as of quarreling and fighting men, and going to the place he saw a number of robbers, all of them in a great rage, and in their midst stood Mahāduta, their chief; and the chief was desperately fighting them, like a lion surrounded by hounds, and he slew several of his aggressors with formidable blows, but there were too many against him; at last he succumbed, and fell to the ground as if dead, covered with wounds. As soon as the robbers had left the place the young samana approached to see whether he could be of any assistance to the wounded men. He found that all the robbers were dead, and there was only a little life left in the chief. He at once went down to the little brooklet which was murmuring near by, fetched fresh water in his bowl and brought it to the dying man. Mahāduta opened his eyes and gnashing his teeth, said; "Where are those ungrateful dogs whom I have led to victory and success? Without me as their chief they will soon perish like jackals hunted down by skilful hunters."

"Do not think of your comrades, the companions of your sinful life," said Panthaka, "but think of your soul, and accept in the last moment the chance of salvation that is offered you. Here is water to drink, and let me dress your wounds; perhaps I may save your life."

"Alas! alas!" replied Mahāduta, "are you not the man whom I beat but yesterday and now you come to my assistance, to assuage my pain? You bring me fresh water to quench my thirst, and try to save my life! It is useless, honorable sir, I am a doomed man. The churls have wounded me unto death—the ungrateful cowards! They have dealt me the blows which I taught them."

"You reap what you have sown;" continued the samana, "had you taught your comrades acts of kindness, you would have received from them acts of kindness, but having taught them the lesson of slaughter, it is but your own deed that you are slain by their hands."

"True, very true," said the robber chief, "my fate is well deserved; but how sad is my lot, that I must reap the full harvest of all my evil deeds in future existences! Advise me, O holy sir, what I can do to lighten the sins of my life which oppress me like a great rock placed upon my breast, taking away the breath of my lungs."

Said Panthaka: "Root out your sinful desires; destroy all evil passions, and fill your soul with kindness toward all your fellow beings."

THE SPIDER WEB.

While the charitable samana washed the wounds, the robber chief said: "I have done much evil and no good. How can I extricate myself from the net of sorrow which I have woven out of the evil desires of my own heart? My Karma will lead me to hell and I shall never be able to walk in the path of salvation."

Said the samana: "Indeed your Karma will in its future incarnations reap the seeds of evil that you have sown. There is no escape for an evil doer from the consequences of his own actions. But there is no cause for despair. The man who is converted and has rooted out the illusion of self, with all its lusts and sinful desires, will be a source of blessing to himself and others.

"As an illustration, I will tell you the story of the great robber Kandata, who died without repentance and was reborn as a demon in hell, where he suffered for his evil deeds the most terrible agonies and pains. He had been in hell several kalpas* and was unable to rise out of his wretched condition, when Buddha appeared upon earth and attained to the blessed state of enlightenment. At that memorable moment a ray of light fell down into hell quickening all the demons with life and hope, and the robber Kandata cried aloud: 'O blessed Buddha, have mercy upon me! I suffer greatly, and although I have done evil, I am anxious to walk in the noble path of righteousness. But I cannot

* Kalpa is a long period of time, an æon.

extricate myself from the net of sorrow. Help me, O Lord ; have mercy on me !' Now, it is the law of Karma that evil deeds lead to destruction, for absolute evil is so bad that it cannot exist. Absolute evil involves impossibility of existence. But good deeds lead to life. Thus there is a final end to every deed that is done, but there is no end to the development of good deeds. The least act of goodness bears fruit containing new seeds of goodness, and they continue to grow, they nourish the soul in its weary transmigrations until it reaches the final deliverance from all evil in Nirvâna. When Buddha, the Lord, heard the prayer of the demon suffering in hell, he said : 'Kandata, did you ever perform an act of kindness ? It will now return to you and help you to rise again. But you cannot be rescued unless the intense sufferings which you endure as consequences of your evil deeds have dispelled all conceit of selfhood and have purified your soul of vanity, lust, and envy.'

"Kandata remained silent, for he had been a cruel man, but the Tathagata in his omniscience saw all the deeds done by the poor wretch, and he perceived that once in his life when walking through the woods he had seen a spider crawling on the ground, and he thought to himself, 'I will not step upon the spider, for he is a harmless creature and hurts nobody.'

"Buddha looked with compassion upon the tortures of Kandata, and sent down a spider on a cobweb and the spider said : 'Take hold of the web and climb up.' When the spider had disappeared, Kandata made great efforts to climb up, and he succeeded. The web was so strong that it held, and he ascended higher and higher. Suddenly he felt the thread trembling and shaking, for behind him other fellow sufferers of his were beginning to climb up. Kandata became frightened. He saw the thinness of the web, and observed that it was elastic, for under the increased weight it stretched out ; yet it still seemed strong enough to carry him. Kandata had heretofore only looked up ; he now looked down, and saw following close upon his heels, also climbing up on the cobweb, a numberless mob of the denizens of hell. 'How can this thin thread bear the weight of all,' he thought to himself,



and seized with fear he shouted loudly: 'Let go the cobweb. It is mine!' At once the cobweb broke, and Kandata fell back into hell.

"The illusion of self was still upon Kandata. He did not know the miraculous power of a sincere longing to rise upwards and enter the noble path of righteousness. It is thin like a cobweb, but it will carry millions of people, and the more there are that climb it, the easier will be the efforts of every one of them. But as soon as in a man's heart the idea arises: 'This is mine; let the bliss of righteousness be mine alone, and let no one else partake of it,' the thread breaks, and you fall back into your old condition of self-hood, for self-hood is damnation, and truth is bliss. What is hell? It is nothing but egotism, and Nirvāna is a life of righteousness."

"Let me take hold of a spiderweb," said the dying robber chief, when the samana had finished his story, "and I will pull myself up out of the depth of hell."

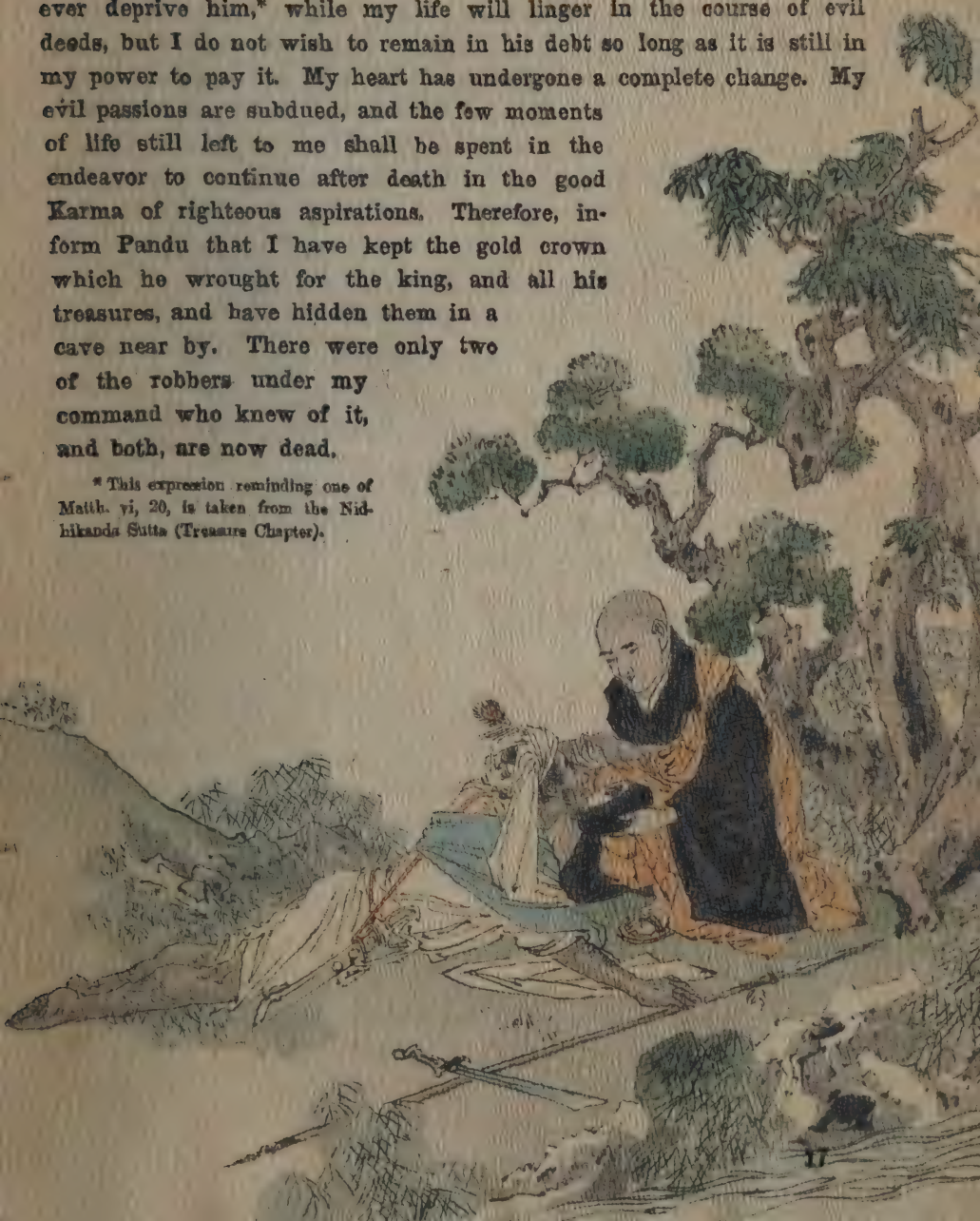
THE BEQUEST OF A GOOD KARMA.

He lay quiet for a while to collect his thoughts, and then addressed the samana not without effort:

"Listen, honorable sir, I will make a confession: I was the servant of Pandu, the jeweller of Kaushambi, but when he unjustly had me tortured I ran away, and became a chief of robbers. Some time ago when I heard through my spies that Pandu was passing through the mountains, I succeeded in robbing him of a great part of his wealth. Will you now go to him and tell him, that I have forgiven from the bottom of my heart, the injury which he unjustly inflicted upon me, and ask him, too, to pardon me for having robbed him. While I stayed with him his heart was as hard as a stone, and I learned to imitate the selfishness of his character. I have heard that he has become benevolent and is now pointed out as an example of goodness and justice. He has laid up treasures of which no robber can

ever deprive him,* while my life will linger in the course of evil deeds, but I do not wish to remain in his debt so long as it is still in my power to pay it. My heart has undergone a complete change. My evil passions are subdued, and the few moments of life still left to me shall be spent in the endeavor to continue after death in the good Karma of righteous aspirations. Therefore, inform Pandu that I have kept the gold crown which he wrought for the king, and all his treasures, and have hidden them in a cave near by. There were only two of the robbers under my command who knew of it, and both, are now dead.

* This expression reminding one of Matth. vi, 20, is taken from the Nidhikanda Sutta (Treasure Chapter).



Let Pandu take a number of armed men, and come to the place and take back the property of which I have deprived him. One act of justice will atone for some of my sins, it will help to cleanse my soul of its impurities, and give me a start in the right direction on my search for salvation."

Then Mahāduta described the situation of the cave and died in the arms of Panthaka.

As soon as Panthaka, the young samana, had reached Kaushambi, he went to the jeweller and gave him a full account of his recent adventure in the forest. And Pandu went with an escort of armed men and secured the treasures which the robber-chief had concealed in the cave; and they buried the robber-chief and his slain comrades with all honors, and Panthaka spoke at the grave, discoursing on the words of Buddha:

"By one's self evil is done; by one's self one suffers.

"By one's self evil is left undone; by one's self one is purified.

"Purity and impurity belong to one's self; no one can purify another.

"You yourself must make an effort. The Buddhas are only preachers."*

"Our Karma," the samana said, "is not the work of Ishvara, or Brahma, or Indra, or of any one of the gods. Our Karma is the product of our own actions. My action is the womb that bears me; it is the inheritance which devolves upon me; it is the curse of my misdeeds and the blessing of my righteousness. My action is the resource by which alone I can work out my salvation."†

Pandu carried all his treasures back to Kaushambi, and using with discretion the wealth thus unexpectedly regained, he became richer and more powerful than he had ever been before, and when he was dying at an advanced age he had all his sons, and daughters, and grandchildren gathered round him and said unto them:

* Quoted from *Dhammapada*.

† Quoted from the *Anguttara Nikāya*, *Pāṭicaka Nipāta*, See Oldenberg, *Buddha*, p. 249.



"My dear children, do not blame others for your lack of success. Seek the cause of your ills in yourselves. Unless you are blinded by vanity you will find it, and having found it you will see the way out of it. The remedy of your ills, too, lies in yourselves. Let never your mental eyes be covered by the veil of *Máyá*, and remember the words which have proved a talisman in my life :

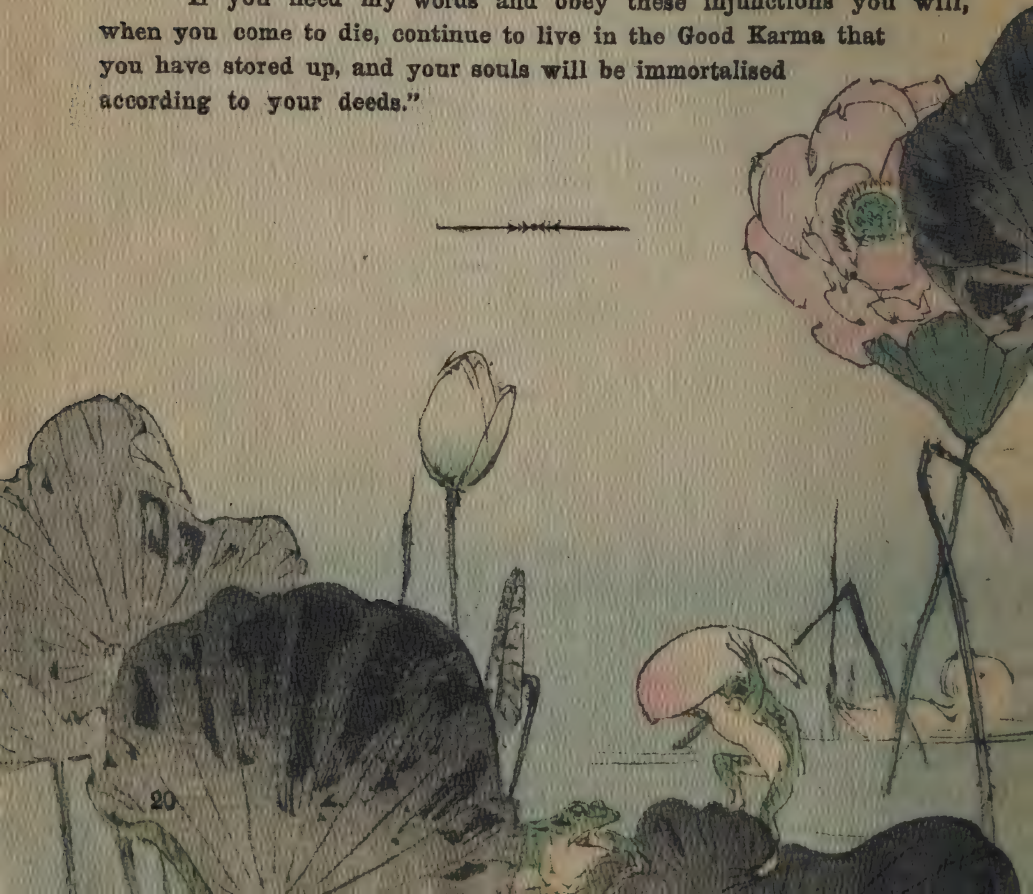
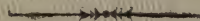
'He who hurts others, injures himself.

'He who helps others, advances his own interests.

'Let the illusion of self disappear.

'And you will naturally walk in the path of truth.'

"If you heed my words and obey these injunctions you will, when you come to die, continue to live in the Good Karma that you have stored up, and your souls will be immortalised according to your deeds."



EPILOGUE.

There is philosophy underlying the story "Karma," which, in its scientific, religious, and ethical aspects is set forth in two periodicals, *The Open Court*, a weekly, devoted to the Religion of Science, and *The Monist*, a quarterly, devoted to the Philosophy of Science; and this philosophy may be briefly characterised as Positive Monism, that is to say, a unitary world-conception, which endeavors to become a systematised statement of facts.

The views of the author of "Karma" are set forth in various philosophical, psychological, and ethical treatises, most of which have been republished in popular editions. His religious conviction, propounded in his booklet, "The Religion of Science," is in agreement with Buddha's teachings, so lucidly set forth in his farewell address to the disciples, as recorded in the *Māhapari-nibbāna Sutta*, where we read that Buddha said: "Hold fast to the truth as your lamp. Seek salvation in the truth alone."

The "Religion of Science" outlines the philosophical basis of religion, and traces all the essential religious needs and aspirations, the comfort man finds in affliction, the guidance of conduct, and the fervor with which man may consecrate the various exertions of his life to the facts of experience, be they of a psychical, physical, or a social nature. Thus, "The Religion of Science" is, like Buddhism, a religion which bases man's hopes for a deliverance from evil upon enlightenment.

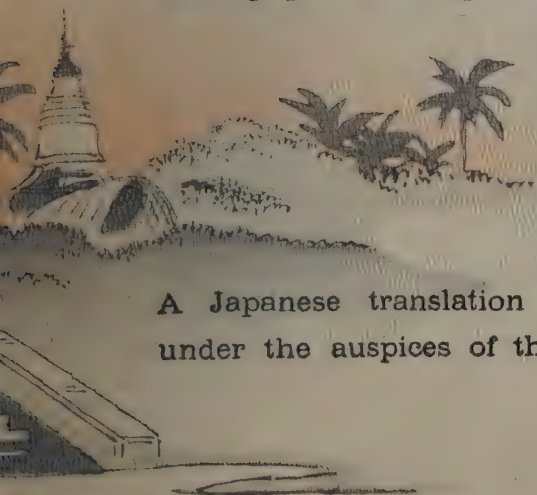
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"The Gospel of Buddha, According to Old Records," told by Paul Carus, is a brief and faithful compilation extracted from the sacred books of the Buddhistic canon. The book is heartily recommended by His Majesty, the King of Siam, and all representative Buddhists who served as delegates to the Chicago Parliament of Religions; among them E. Dharmapala, editor of the Maha-Bodhi Journal, His Royal Highness, Prince Chandradat Chudhadharn, official delegate of Siamese Buddhism, C. A. Seelakkhandha, Buddhist high priest of Dodauduwa, Ceylon, A. E. Buultjens, Principal of Ananda College, Colombo, Ceylon, and other teachers holding prominent positions in Buddhist schools.



A Japanese translation by T. Suzuki appeared under the auspices of the Rt. Rev. Shaku Soyen, abbot of the Zen sect, in Kamakura, Japan.

नमो भगवत्या
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